

Highlands Ranch Herald

Recently, I introduced the H.R. 435, Military Enlistment Opportunity Act. This legislation seeks to expand military enlistment opportunities and create a system that mutually benefits the armed services and individuals with temporary immigration status. Under my bill, individuals who have resided legally in the United States continuously for at least two years as well as the Deferred Action Childhood Arrivals (DACA) would be permitted to sign up for military service alongside American citizens and lawful permanent residents (LPR). The DACA program was recently created by the Department of Homeland Security to give employment authorization to certain young people who came to the United States illegally as children.

This legislation provides a common sense solution to help solve two nationally important issues. First, the bill provides a new group of willing, capable and skilled applicants to serve in the military. Second, it creates an opportunity for individuals with conditional immigration status to naturalize through military service; giving them permanent status subject to the same rights and obligations as natural born citizens.

As a Member of the House Armed Services Committee, one of my goals for this legislation is to help the military ensure our national security goals are met by enhancing the available pool of qualified individuals. The military currently requires that recruits be American citizens or LPRs. However, we have a regrettable situation today where a majority of native born Americans can't meet the standards for military service because of some disqualification: they are overweight, have a criminal record, a history of drug or alcohol abuse, don't have a high school diploma, or they can't get a passing score on the entrance exam. A 2009 study conducted by a group of retired military leaders entitled "Ready, Willing and Unable to Serve" concluded that 75% of young adults between the ages 17-24 do not qualify for military service.

Additionally, there is a need to expand the pool of those eligible to serve because of the increasingly advanced technical requirements of the U.S. military. Rapidly growing areas like cyber warfare and ongoing analysts needs require the skills that foreign students studying in the United States can bring to the military. These visa holders bring abilities like critical language skills and advanced technical degrees that will increase the proficiency of our military.

My legislation will also provide a path for young people in the newly created DACA program to be naturalized through military service. It makes sense that these individuals, who have the

desire and ability to serve in the U.S. military, should be given the opportunity to do so. There have been over 154,000 young people who have been accepted under the DACA program, and these patriotic individuals should have the chance to honorably serve their country and become naturalized citizens.

Current law states that any individual who legally enlists and serves in the military for one year is naturalized. During wartime the naturalization is immediate. My bill would extend this benefit to DACA individuals.

All enlistees, upon joining the military, incur an eight-year service obligation. Naturalization only becomes final and irrevocable after five years of honorable service. Therefore, it is important to highlight that the grant of immediate naturalization is subject to rescission if the individual does not complete the service requirements or is discharged under less than honorable circumstances..

Although there will be a larger debate this year about immigration and the necessary changes that must occur to ensure that our legal immigration system is effective, the Military Enlistment Opportunity Act is smart legislation that takes a small but positive step forward by allowing certain individuals to serve our country in the military and earn U.S. citizenship. Moreover, this bill will aid our military by providing a larger number of skilled recruits to ensure our national defense capabilities are not diminished by a shrinking recruiting base.

It should be an easy decision for my colleagues in Congress on the left and the right to support the Military Enlistment Opportunity Act. I am hopeful we can solve these problems together.

By Rep. Mike Coffman

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